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Commentary on: Patrick Bondy's "The epistemic approach to argument evaluation: Virtues, beliefs, commitments"

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For the purposes of his essay, Professor Bondy takes for granted that "the epistemic approach to the theory of argument is reasonable" (p. 2). But what does that approach involve, and more particularly, what, according to it, is the aim of argumentation? Well, to answer that question we might first ask what the epistemic aim of belief is. Is it to hold true beliefs and to avoid holding false ones (cf., p. 1)? But what does that mean since these two aims may conflict? Is the aim to have a high ratio of true to false beliefs? That does not seem right, for as Bondy points out, that goal could be satisfied by holding only obviously true beliefs, say, for each of us that we exist or that $1 + 1 = 2$ (p. 3). Maybe it is holding *many* true beliefs. But that does not seem right either, for we could do that by memorizing the phone numbers of people in the phone book, or by believing lots of trivial mathematical truths (such as: $1/4$ is $1/2$ of $1/2$; $1/8$ is $1/2$ of $1/4$, and so on). Maybe it is having many true beliefs about a broad *range* of subjects, as Bondy suggests (p. 3). Even that does not seem right for I might hold lots of trivial beliefs on a wide range of subjects (phone books, math, the number of grass blades in town squares across the country, the number of grains of sand in sandboxes across the country, etc.). I think the proper epistemic aim for every person is to believe P if and only if P is true for any proposition, P , that he considers. Whether the proposition is important or trivial is of pragmatic, but not epistemic, concern. I think the same goes for the question of whether someone holds many true beliefs or only a few, or a wide, or only a narrow, range of beliefs.

While I think this is the proper epistemic *aim* of belief and also of argument, I don't think a *good* argument is merely one that arrives at a true belief. The following argument is not a good one:

- (1) Windsor has a population larger than Toronto's.
- (2) I will live to the age of 200.
- (3) Therefore, Obama is currently the President of the United States.

even though it has a true conclusion.

A *good* argument need not achieve the relevant *aim* of argumentation. The epistemic view of what constitutes a good argument should hold that *the aim* of a good argument is a true belief supported by true premises, but that what makes the

argument *good* is the *responsible pursuit* of that aim. Bondy is himself a responsibilist about argumentation (p. 5). But he thinks that we are being epistemically responsible in holding a belief if “we are doing the best we can” in acquiring that belief (p. 4). However, if we suffer from some defect that causes us to weigh the evidence incorrectly, then we can be doing the best *we can* in acquiring some belief, be *epistemically blameless* in holding that belief, and yet *not be justified* in holding it. To be justified in holding some belief, that belief must fit the evidence. The evidence the person actually possesses? Not necessarily, for the person may have been negligent in failing to gather more evidence before forming her belief, and this could affect whether she is justified in believing what she does. Justification requires the person to fit her beliefs to the evidence she *should possess*.

So what is it, on the epistemic view, to be responsible in argumentation? Bondy says that, “...responsible engagement in argument involves accepting the conclusion on the basis of the premises when (and only when) the premises *give the arguers good reason* for thinking the conclusion is true.” (p. 5; my italics). On this account, a person can be responsible in argumentation even if the premises do not really support the conclusion, provided she *has reason to believe* they do (and is justified in accepting the premises). So, for instance, a person could be responsible in her argumentation if the argument she gives contains a subtle equivocation that she does not notice. In that case, she will have *good reason to believe* that the justified premises support the conclusion because they *seem to*.

However, Bondy gives a second slightly different account of a responsible argument according to which the argument is a good one, “...when and only when *the premises* provide good reason for thinking that the conclusion is true.” (p. 6; my italics). On this account, it might be argued that an argument that contains a subtle equivocation is not a good argument because *the premises* do not give the arguer good reason to believe that the conclusion is true. They would do that only if they really did support the conclusion.

I do not offer these observations as criticisms of Bondy’s account of *responsible* argumentation or of what it is to be a good argument. I think there may be two senses of “good argument” on the epistemic approach alone, and the subtly different accounts Bondy gives capture these two different senses.

For Bondy, to be an epistemically virtuous arguer is to be disposed to give responsible arguments. As he says, for him the primary focus is on what it is for an argument to be a responsible one, with the secondary focus being on what it is to be a good arguer. He is not really a virtue theorist who holds that a good argument is what a good arguer would produce, or at least tend to produce. For him, a good argument is a responsible argument and a virtuous arguer is someone disposed to give responsible arguments.

What traits does Bondy think make one a virtuous arguer? He says that *being communicative* is one such trait (p. 6). A communicative person is one who is disposed to share his reasons for his beliefs with others, which will enable him to receive critical feedback, which constitutes further evidence for or against his belief. However, gathering further evidence may not be necessary for the person to have a justified belief. Maybe Bondy thinks that it is a good thing to have a *stable* belief and that stability will be increased with increased evidence.

He also lists *sensitivity to detail* as another virtue of arguers (p. 6). The idea is that if a person were not sensitive to detail he may not be sensitive to important, but subtle, differences that affect justification. For instance, if a person cannot distinguish crows from ravens, he might conclude something about “big black birds that caw” that only applies to, say, ravens, not crows. Sensitivity to detail allows a person to see that certain evidence is pertinent to some claim but not to others.

To sum up, just as the proper epistemic *aim* for belief is to believe a proposition if and only if it's true, the proper *aim* of argumentation is to have an argument with true premises that really do support the conclusion. However, a subject can be *justified* in believing a proposition provided her belief fits the evidence that she should have, even if the belief is not true. Similarly, an arguer can be *responsible* in accepting the conclusion of some argument if she is justified in believing its premises and there is reason to think that these premises support the conclusion, even if the conclusion is false.

A responsible argument provides justification for believing its conclusion. Bondy and I may disagree on some of the details, but we are essentially in agreement about the nature of responsible argumentation and on the nature of a virtuous arguer, namely, someone disposed to give and to recognize responsible arguments.